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# ORNITHOLOGY

OF THE

UNITED STATES OF NORTH AMERICA;

OR,

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE BIRDS INHABITING THE STATES AND  
TERRITORIES OF THE UNION,

WITH

AN ACCURATE FIGURE OF EACH, DRAWN AND COLOURED  
FROM NATURE.

EDITED BY JOHN K. TOWNSEND,

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OF A JOURNEY ACROSS THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS TO THE COLUMBIA RIVER," ETC.

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VOL. I.

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J. B. CHEVALIER.

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## INTRODUCTION.

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In the commencement of a task like the present, it is of course necessary that the object and design of the publication should be stated, and the reasons given for obtruding upon public notice another work on the Ornithology of the United States in addition to the several highly creditable ones which already adorn the literature of our country.

ALEXANDER WILSON was the great pioneer in this branch of American science; and who that appreciates his chaste and eloquent style, his accurate and happy delineation of a class of the most lovely objects in nature, can fail to experience the greatest delight in reviewing the pages of the "American Ornithology." Next among the labourers in this field, followed the amiable and enthusiastic AUDUBON, a man of whom America may well be proud, and who has given to the world a work of magnificence which will forever remain a monument of his surpassing genius, perseverance and research. Next in order was that eminent naturalist, THOMAS NUTTALL, and to him are we indebted for a Manual of American Ornithology, highly valuable as a text book, which, like all that has proceeded from his pen, exhibits in an uncommon degree the qualities of patient investigation and sound judgment, with great beauty and eloquence of description.

The present publication is not expected to rival in their appropriate sphere those which have preceded it, but it is con-

sidered desirable to offer the public a work of portable dimensions and generally accessible form, containing a particular account of the birds of the United States, with all the newly discovered species, and a faithful and accurate figure of each. No one has yet completed this task except the indefatigable AUDUBON, the high price of whose splendid work confines it to the libraries of the affluent. The other excellent histories to which we have alluded are necessarily imperfect, because many species have been discovered since their publication.

The systematic arrangement which we propose to adopt, is that formed by the PRINCE OF MUSIGNANO in the Synopsis of North American Birds; and his generic and sub-generic descriptions will be generally preserved. We are bound also to acknowledge that we shall receive important aid from various sources in addition to those that have been specified.

# ORNITHOLOGY

OF THE

## UNITED STATES.

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### ORDER I.—ACCIPITRES.—*Lin.*

This order is characterized by a short, stout, compressed and hooked bill, the lower mandible shorter, generally blunt, sometimes truncated. Nostrils situated in a cere, or membrane, covering the base of the bill. Tongue generally thick, fleshy and obtuse. Feet strong, soles rough or warty. Nails strong, curved, retractile. Tail usually of twelve feathers.

### FAMILY I. VULTERINI.—*Ill.*

Head and a portion of the neck naked, often wattled.

GENUS I.—CATHARTES, *Ill.* VULTUR, *Lin.* SARCORAMPHUS, *Duméril.*  
VULTURES.

The upper mandible is covered to the middle by a cere; nostrils near the middle of the bill; tongue channelled, the edges serrate; head flattened and wrinkled; tarsus naked and slender; side toes equal, middle one long, and united by a membrane at its base to the exterior; first quill short, the third longest; tail of twelve feathers.

These are gregarious, cowardly and ignoble birds, feeding almost exclusively upon the carcasses of dead animals. Their flight, when near the

earth, is slow and heavy, but becomes quick, animated and graceful in the upper regions of the atmosphere. They seek and discover their prey by sight, and not, as has been generally and erroneously supposed, by their power of scent, which has been ascertained by experiment to be very imperfect.

The Vultures, properly so called, exist only on the ancient continent; but of the genus *Cathartes* we have three well ascertained species.

Two others, the CONDOR (*Cathartes gryphus*) and the KING VULTURE, (*C. papa*), are given by Prince Bonaparte and Professor Nuttall as inhabitants of the southern portions of North America; but if they are ever found within our limits, their visits are altogether accidental, and they therefore scarcely merit a place in our fauna. Mr. Audubon has rejected them for this reason.

## CALIFORNIAN VULTURE.

*CATHARTES CALIFORNIANUS*, Ranz.

### PLATE I.

The Californian Vulture inhabits the region of the Columbia river to the distance of five hundred miles from its mouth, and is most abundant in spring, at which season it feeds on the dead salmon that are thrown in great numbers upon the shores. It is also often met with near the Indian villages, being attracted by the offal of the fish thrown around the habitations. It associates with the Turkey Buzzard, (*C. aura*), but, is easily distinguished from that species in flight, both by its greater size and the more abrupt curvature of its wing. The Indians, whose observations in such matters may generally be depended upon, say that it ascertains the presence of food solely by its power of vision; thus corroborating the interesting observations and experiments made by Mr. Audubon upon several of the vulture tribe. On the upper waters of the Columbia, the fish intended for winter store are usually deposited in huts, made of branches of trees interlaced. I have frequently seen the Ravens attempt to effect a lodgment in these depositories, but have never known the Vulture to be engaged in this way, although these birds were numerous in the immediate vicinity.

Their food, while on the Columbia, appears to consist almost exclusively of fish, as in the neighbourhood of the falls and rapids of the river it is



California Vulture (young size)



always in abundance. The salmon, in their attempts to leap over the obstruction, become exhausted, and are cast up on the beaches in great numbers. Thither therefore resort all the unclean birds of the country—the present species, the Turkey Buzzard, Raven, &c. The Californian Vulture cannot, however, be called a plentiful species, as even in the situations mentioned it is rare to see more than two or three at a time, and these so shy as not to allow an approach to within a hundred yards, except by stratagem. It appears on the Columbia about the first of June, and retires to the mountains to breed near the end of August. Its habits at the season of breeding are not known. The Indians of the Columbia say that its nest is fixed on the ground, in swamps under the pine forests, chiefly in the alpine country. In walking, it resembles a Turkey, strutting over the ground with great dignity; but this dignity is occasionally lost sight of, especially when two are striving to reach a dead fish which has just been cast upon the shore; the stately walk then degenerates into a clumsy sort of hopping canter, which is any thing but graceful. When about to rise, they always hop or run for several yards, in order to give an impetus to their heavy body, in this resembling the Condor of South America, whose well known habit furnishes the natives with an easy mode of capturing him, by means of a narrow pen, in which a dead carcass has been deposited. The present species could doubtless be taken in the same way.

CALIFORNIAN VULTURE, *Cathartes californianus*, Audubon's Birds of America, vol. iv. pl. 326; Bonap. Synop., p. 22; Nuttall's Manual, vol. i. p. 39.

Head and upper part of the neck bare, except the forehead and a semicircular space before the eye, which are closely covered with small feathers; fore part of the neck longitudinally, the occiput and hind neck transversely wrinkled. Wings very long, acuminate, secondaries rounded. Tail even, of twelve broad rounded feathers. Bill yellow; cere and naked part of the head and neck yellowish-red; iris dark hazel; feet dark grey; claws brownish-black. General colour greyish-black, above narrowly margined with light brown and grey; secondaries and edges of the primaries light grey exteriorly; margins of the inner secondaries toward the base, and those of the secondary coverts, with a large portion of the extremity of the latter, white; axillaries and many of the lower wing-coverts white. Length, 55 inches.

## BLACK VULTURE, OR CARRION CROW.

*CATHARTES JOTA, Bonap.*

## PLATE II.

This species is more common in the Southern States than the preceding, where it is a constant resident. It feeds indiscriminately upon fresh or putrid meat, and not unfrequently attacks sick or wearied animals, young chickens, calves, &c. In the Southern cities it may be constantly seen perched upon the houses and chimney tops, quietly waiting the appearance of its most appropriate food, which is often deposited in the streets, and attends with great regularity the shambles of the butchers, hopping about them like chickens, and picking up the fragments of meat and offal which are cast away. The mode of feeding of the Vulture is often not a little disgusting. A great number, sometimes even a hundred or more, collect around a carcass, and commence tugging and tearing at the tough and distended skin until a lodgment is effected; and when the aperture is widened sufficiently, the whole filthy crowd dart pell mell into the vile and festering intestines, tearing them in pieces, hissing and blowing the filth from their nostrils, and scrambling and fighting for precedence in the horrible banquet. So great is the number of Vultures, that in a very short time the carcass of a horse or cow is completely stripped of every particle of its flesh, and the denuded skeleton is left to bleach in the sun and to be torn in pieces by half savage dogs, which regularly watch and follow the feathered marauders. After the feast, each Vulture mounts to the limb of some dead tree in the neighbourhood, and there they may be seen by scores, sitting listlessly, their wings open and drooping, and their black, skinny heads depressed between their shoulders. The flight of this species is not so easy and graceful as that of the Turkey Buzzard. It requires to hop a few times before rising from the earth, and, when in the air, flaps its wings frequently to maintain the sailing motion which the Turkey Buzzard performs with so much ease.

What has been said of the latter species in regard to its olfactory power, applies equally to the one now under consideration, as well as to all the Vultures of the North American continent. During a visit to Chili, two years since, I found the Condors (*Cathartes gryphus*) numerous. They



Black Vulture or Carrion Crow (1st and 2nd species.)









Plate 1. v. 1.

frequently approached the purlieus of the town of Valparaiso, and were commonly seen sailing over the *quebrados*, or vallies, within a mile of it. I made particular inquiry of the natives relative to the habits of this bird, and, with very few exceptions, all agreed that it was guided to his food by its power of vision, and not by its sense of smell. They did not assert that it possessed no olfactory power, but that the ocular sense was in much greater perfection.

The Black Vulture, according to Mr. Audubon, never lays more than two eggs, which are deposited in the bottom of a prostrate log, in the excavation of a bank of earth, or on the bare ground. They are about three inches in length, rather pointed at the smaller end, with a pure white ground, marked towards the greater end with large irregular dashes of black and dark brown.

BLACK VULTURE, *CATHARTES JOTA*, Audubon's Birds of America, vol. ii. pl. 106.

Bonap. Synop., p. 23. Nuttall's Manual, vol. i. p. 46.

VULTUR ATRATUS, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. ix. p. 104, pl. 75, fig. 2.

CATHARTES ATRATUS, Swains. and Richards. Fauna Boreali Americ., part ii. p. 6.

The bill is blackish at base, and yellowish-grey at tip. Head and upper part of the neck destitute of feathers, and covered with a black corrugated skin, sparsely covered with short hairs, and downy behind; iris reddish-hazel; the general colour of the plumage is of a dull black, slightly glossed with blue; a dark cream coloured spot is seen upon the primaries when the wing is opened; first quill short, third and fourth longest; tail nearly even, of twelve broad feathers; feet whitish grey, claws black. Length, 26 inches; extent of wings, 4 feet 6 inches; bill,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches.

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## TURKEY BUZZARD.

*CATHARTES AURA*, *Ill.*

## PLATE III.

This species is common, and is universally known throughout the Middle and Southern States of the Union; but according to Mr. Audubon,

it has never been seen eastward of the confines of New Jersey. In the Southern States it is exceedingly common, associating with the Black Vulture or Carrion Crow, (*Cathartes jota*), and, with the last named species, it is protected by law, for its services in removing the filth from the streets of the cities. Here they are exceedingly tame, almost domestic, alighting upon the roofs of the houses, and hopping about the streets like domestic fowls. In the Middle States, where they are less abundant, they are shy, except after a hearty meal. These disgusting gourmands then become so tame, in consequence of over-feeding, that they may be readily approached, and even taken with the hand. This, however, is a somewhat dangerous experiment, as has been repeatedly proved. A humorous anecdote is related by Mr. Ord in the ninth volume of Wilson's Ornithology. A man once saw a number of Turkey Buzzards feeding upon a dead carcass, and upon approaching them, and observing in them no indication to depart, he conceived the design of appropriating one of the odoriferous gentry as a pet for his children. He accordingly selected a fine fat fellow among the sated and heedless vultures, and approaching him from behind with the utmost caution, before the victim was aware, he was pounced upon and secured in the arms of the delighted adventurer. No sooner, however, did the poor bird find himself in durance, than he looked innocently up into the countenance of his captor, and, without other warning than a harsh, choking gurgle, discharged the whole contents of his stomach over his face and person; and, in the emphatic words of the narrator, "he was forever cured of his inclination for Turkey Buzzards."

A variety of very interesting experiments have been made both by Mr. Audubon and the Rev. Dr. Bachman, of Charleston, by which it has been clearly and satisfactorily proved that the Turkey Buzzard and Carrion Crow feed indiscriminately upon fresh or putrid meat, and that they are guided to their food solely by their power of vision, and not by their sense of smell—facts which have staggered the whole scientific fraternity, who have been so firmly grounded in the antiquated belief of the amazing powers of scent possessed by the Vultures, that many even yet refuse to give credence to the new doctrine.

The Turkey Buzzard forms no nest, but usually selects some old decayed log or stump in which to deposit its eggs. The situations chosen are the deep and tangled recesses of some marsh or swamp; and here, on the soft, decomposed fragments occupying the cavity of the wood, are laid two eggs. These, according to Mr. Audubon, measure two inches and seven-eighths in length, and one inch and seven and a half eighths in their greatest breadth, and are of a light cream colour, splashed toward the great end with large irregular markings of black and brown.





Condor (Cathartes aura) of the Andes



TURKEY BUZZARD, *Cathartes aura*, Audubon's Birds of America, vol. ii. pl. 151; Bonap. Synop., p. 23; Nuttall's Manual, vol. i. p. 43; Wils. Am. Orn., vol. ix. pl. 75, fig. 1.

Bill whitish, or yellowish-white; naked portion of the head and neck reddish flesh colour, sparsely sprinkled with black hairs; iris dark brown; feet yellowish flesh colour; claws black; the hind neck and upper portion of the neck feathers covered with black down; whole plumage brown, or blackish-brown, the feathers of the wings in some specimens edged with dark grey, and the back having tints of brown and greenish; third primary longest; below dark sooty-brown, somewhat glossed on the breast with green. Weight, about 5 pounds. Length,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet. Extent of wings, 6 feet 4 inches.

## GENUS II.—POLYBORUS.

Bill rather long, deep, much compressed; upper mandible with the dorsal line nearly straight, but declinate for half its length, curved in the remaining part, the ridge narrow, the sides flat and sloping, the tip declinate, trigonal; tip of the lower mandible narrow, and obliquely rounded. Nostrils oblong, oblique. Feet rather long and slender; tarsus rounded, and covered with hexagonal scales; toes of moderate size, the outer connected to the middle one at base by a membrane; lateral toes equal, middle one considerably longer, hind toe shortest; claws long and pointed.

Closely allied to *Cathartes* in habits. Feeds upon fresh or putrid meat, and dead or living animals, rats, cats, fowls and frogs; and, like the Falcon tribe, frequently carries its prey from place to place in its talons. Pugnacious, quarrelsome and tyrannical. Flight easy, graceful, and long sustained.

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## CARACARA EAGLE.

POLYBORUS BRASILIENSIS, Vieill.

## PLATE IV.

This fine species seems not to have been observed within the precincts of the United States, until accidentally discovered by the celebrated

Audubon near St. Augustine, in East Florida. The same zealous naturalist afterwards found it on Galveston Island, in Texas; and from its graceful, sweeping flight and erect attitudes, was long mistaken for a Hawk. Although probably common in many parts of South America, it must be considered as rather rare in the United States, but few individuals having been observed within our limits. In the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia there is a fine specimen, corresponding exactly with our plate, shot in Mexico by Dr. M. Burrough, and by him presented to the Society.

It is said to breed in Florida. The nest is placed on the highest branches of tall trees in the pine barrens, formed of dry sticks, and rudely lined with small roots, grass, or moss. In the Texas, according to Mr. Audubon, the fabric is not unfrequently formed upon the tops of bushes only seven or eight feet from the ground. Like the Turkey Buzzard, it lays but two eggs.

CARACARA EAGLE, *POLYBORUS BRASILIENSIS*, Vieill.

*POLYBORUS VULGARIS*, Galerie des Ois, pl. 8.

*FALCO BRASILIENSIS*, Gmel. Syst. Nat., vol. i. p. 262; Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. i. p. 21.

CARACARA ORDINAIRE, Cuv. Regne Animal, vol. i. p. 328.

Bill pale bluish-dusky, the edges yellow; space before the eye, cheeks, throat and cere of both mandibles bare, with a few scattered bristly feathers, the colour a deep carmine; upper part of the head umber-brown, streaked with brownish-black; hind neck and fore part of the back light brownish-yellow, mottled with dark brown near the tips of the feathers; wings reaching to within two inches of the end of the tail, the fourth quill longest, the first and seventh equal; tips of the primaries abruptly narrowed on their inner vanes; these, with some of the secondaries, are barred with broad bands of white, excepting towards the end; tail coverts dull white, slightly barred with dusky; tail greyish-white, with sixteen narrow bars, and a broad terminal band of blackish-brown, the tips lighter; throat greyish-white, with a tinge of yellow; breast transversely barred with crescentic marks of white and umber-brown; hind part, abdomen, sides and tibia dark brown; lower tail-coverts yellowish-white, obscurely banded with dusky; iris dark brown; legs and feet yellow; claws brownish-black. Length,  $23\frac{1}{2}$  inches; extent of wings, 48 inches.

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